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ABSTRACT

One researcher found that the most productive collaborative learning approach has at its core a communally evolved metalanguage to generate and maintain ongoing dialogue among students and between students and their teacher. A shared metadiscourse about writing was established in the classroom by working in small groups to determine qualities of good writing and then shape them into a statement that would be meaningful and agreeable to all. Creating group histories increased student autonomy and commitment by permitting students to determine their own goals, make decisions about achieving them, and reflect upon their success. Creating questions to initiate group discussion for each draft helped reveal students' heightened awareness of the kinds of questions that will provoke the assistance they require. Students wrote journals after each collaborative session to react to the group discussion. Each composition handed in for teacher reading is accompanied by a letter of transmittal that gives the following information: goals for the composition; how the group helped the student to achieve these goals; risks taken or features of the writing that especially please the student; and direction on how the teacher should read and respond to the paper. This triple-tiered pedagogical approach (whole class, small group, and student-teacher) is intended primarily as a mechanism to enable students to take more charge over their writing goals, processes, and valuations. For students to gain autonomy as true student collaborators rather than as teacher-directed peer groups, collaboration needs to be an integral part of learning and writing in every class period. (Eighteen references are attached.) (MG)

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Sharon Hamilton-Wieler

COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOMS: BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS

ED324679

August 21, 1989 Journal Entry

I'm so intimidated by this class. I don't know anybody. We've been told we're going to have to read our papers to others in the class. I don't want to. I've done that before, and it's just a case of the blind leading the blind. I just want to do my own work, find out what you want me to do to get an A, and get out of here. Lisa

December 2, 1989 Journal Entry

When I came into this class, all I wanted was to get an A. I didn't know about other kinds of goals. I didn't know about heuristics and revision. And I never realized how much collaborating with others in a group could help me to become a better writer. To become a better writer. That's my goal now. And I have to credit my group for starting me off on that goal. They told me what I did well -- I mean, I knew I was pretty good at description, but their support and comments encouraged me to work harder at it, to push for more interesting ways of writing things. But they also helped me with things I wasn't as good at, like punctuation and grammar, and sticking to a focus. I still would like to get an A. but that's not my most important goal. I want

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to learn how I can improve my writing so that I become a better writer, and if that earns me an A, that's great! Lisa

Although some students look forward to sharing and talking about their writing in a collaborative setting, many others, like Lisa, are reluctant. Lisa's first journal entry of the semester mentions two of the most common reasons for this reluctance: (1) students fear exposing themselves, through their writing, to their peers, and (2) students often feel that, since they are all in the same class, their level of expertise is so similar that they won't be able to help each other. The assumption that feeds this second reason is that only the teacher has sufficient knowledge to validate the student's writing. Lisa's first journal entry implies her belief in this assumption when she states her desire to find out what her teacher wants her to do to get an A.

As Lisa's freshman composition teacher, I was not surprised by her initial journal entry. Most of her concerns had been expressed by other students at the beginning of previous semesters, as well as by others in her class. I chose hers to begin this article because her first and last entries serve as articulated touchstones on her journey towards increased awareness of writing as a social act, with social contexts, social implications, and social consequences. I could as easily have begun with the following mirror image of this journey:

KATHY (a freshman composition instructor): What are we teaching in this research project anyhow? Are we teaching them how to collaborate? or are we teaching them how to write? (Aug. 15, 1989)

KATHY: Now I understand why you delayed answering that question. A year ago I wouldn't have understood your answer; now I wouldn't even pose the question. It's not a question of "either/or"; writing <u>is</u> a collaborative act of writer, reader, and a myriad of shared and evolving contexts. Collaboration is not one way to improve writing. Writing is, in its essence, a collaborative act. The research project helped me to begin to understand that. The ensuing year has reinforced it. A collaborative writing class is the only way to teach writing with integrity. My students prefer it, and I prefer reading the papers that benefit from it. (June 23, 1990)

A happy, productive journey for both Lisa and Kathy! Why, then, does collaborative learning and writing remain, in Anne Ruggles Gere's words, on the "margins of pedagogy" (1987)? Reither and Vipond (1989) offer two interrelated reasons: instructors differ in their understanding of the epistemological as well as pedagogical implications of collaboration and, as a consequence, often use collaboration within the framework of traditional

curricula, syllabi, and activities. "Group work" and "peer-tutoring" then become as didactic and teacher-controlled as any traditional lecture, and students retain their dependence upon the teacher for determining and valuing their writing efforts. Lisa wrote, "I have to credit my group for starting me off on that goal [to become a better writer]" -- not her instructor, who was instrumental in establishing her group and enabling it to collaborate effectively, but her group! The instructor dominant in the phrase "find out what you want me to do to get an A" at the beginning of the semester has, by the end of the semester, become invisible.

The quality of this invisibility is a significant determinant of the effectiveness of collaborative learning and writing. As the invisible teacher in Lisa's class, and as the visible director of a three-year research project investigating collaboration in freshman composition classes, including Kathy's class, I made several trial-and-error moves before discovering and defining the nature of teacher-invisibility that can productively enable and enhance student autonomy in writing classrooms. Working with colleagues who were exploring collaboration in their classrooms, selecting from Elbow's and Macrorie's minimal intervention techniques (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1979), Bruffee's more structured approaches (1985), Huff and Kline's group structuring suggestions (1987), and Elbow and Belanoff's smorgasbord of collaborative strategies (1989), I observed groups collaborating

in all sorts of ways, listened to their talk, analyzed transcripts of audiotaped collaborative sessions, and read student journals and written texts. On the basis of my own classroom experiences with collaboration, observations of my colleagues' classes, and analyses of transcripts, journals, and student texts, my own pedagogial approach to collaboration began to evolve. Although subject to continual negotiations and modifications with each new class, the approach I have found most productive has at its core a communally-evolved metalanguage to generate and maintain ongoing dialogue among students and between students and their teacher. To determine its effectiveness, not only did I try it in my own class, in which Lisa was a student, but also on an experimental basis with four instructors -- one of whom was Kathy -- each with an experimental class trying out this approach and a control class taught the instructor's usual way.[1] By explaining this pedagogical approach to collaboration, I will try to show how Lisa and her fellow students developed the confidence and competence to help each other generate, explore, craft, and critique their ideas for written text, how Kathy came to see collaboration as an integral part of teaching/learning writing, and how I became invisible.

Autonomy through discourse: Establishing a shared metadiscourse about writing

David Bartholomae (1983) and Patricia Bizzell (1986) have both written of the importance of a shared universe of discourse for

learning in educational settings, one that acknowledges and draws upon students' diverse discourse communities while initiating students into specialized academic discourse communities. Lev Vygotsky assumes a shared and common discourse when he writes of the importance of language in social contexts for moving through the "zone of proximal development" to new or deeper understanding (1962). Michael Polanyi writes of the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge we all have, waiting to be tapped through conversational and experiential prods and probes (1955). According to Noam Chomsky (1965) and Dell Hymes (1980), this reservoir of tacit knowledge includes an extensive understanding of language (Chomsky and Hymes) and of how language works in a wide range of social contexts (Hymes). And yet, what composition teacher has not faced the challenge of a silent class looking only to her as the fount of all wisdom and knowledge about language and writing? My problem, as a writing teacher, was to find a way to enable my students to talk about their written texts using their collective understanding about language and about writing. To impose my terminology and language values, or the terminology and language values of an unknown textbook author, without acknowledging my students' knowledge of language and writing in their respective discourse communities would undermine the integrity of any approach to collaboration. The establishment, therefore, of a shared metadiscourse, based on students' views of what constitutes "good writing" and using students' language as much as possible, seemed an appropiate

beginning for a semester of collaborative learning and writing. Working in small groups to determine qualities of "good writing" and then as a class to shape them into a statement that would be meaningful and agreeable to everyone in the class, we came up with the following:

OUR CLASS STATEMENT OF "GOOD WRITING"

Good writing

flows smoothly

moves coherently from one idea to another

is organized according to ideas and intentions

conveys the writer's vision to readers

understandably and interestingly

elaborates appropriately to develop

message/point/focus/stance/thesis/purpose

with appropriate

mechanics

invites reading

lingers in the memory

is honest, sincere, authentic,

sparks personal meaning: stimulates feeling and/or thought

has something that sets it apart, above the mundane:

alive

fresh

playful

surprising

unique

Each word, each phrase was contributed, explored, and explained by members of the class, so that all students felt ownership in the discourse we agreed would form the basis for our semester's discussions about writing. Each student carried a copy, for easy reference when formulating writing goals and discussing each other's written texts.

Autonomy over individual goals and objectives: Group histories

With increasingly demanding curricula and course syllabi, class time needs to be used as effectively and efficiently as possible. George Hilllocks (1986) points out that the most effective learning occurs in classrooms wherein there are clear and specific objectives or goals, writing problems or tasks that engage students with each other throughout different processes, and high levels of peer interaction concerning specific tasks (122). This environmental mode of instruction can increase student autonomy and commitment when students determine their own goals, decide how they might go about achieving them, and reflect upon their success in having achieved them. Group histories can facilitate this growing autonomy and commitment in collaborative classrooms.

Each writing group designs a folder wherein each group member records the following information, using the metadiscourse agreed

upon in the class statement of "good writing":

a) (soon after completing the class statement) one or two major writing goals for the semester

b) (in the early stages of each paper) one or two goals for each particular writing assignment

c) a goal for each collaborative session (when the session is going to be a major part of the class period)

d) a mid-semester analysis of whether and how these goals are being met, and what the student might do if they are not being met (at mid-semester, students are given the option to form new groups)

e) an end-of-semester analysis of whether and how these goals were met.

All members of the group read each other's goals so they know what to focus on when helping each other, and also so that they have an idea of what others in the group perceive as writing problems. These group histories also contain the names, addresses and telephone numbers of all members of the group, so that they can arrange to call each other for out-of-class collaboration, or can contact absentees to let them know what transpired in class. The message is implicit but strong: students are responsible for determining what they want to achieve in the class; they are responsible for helping each other to achieve these goals; their instructor has confidence that they have the competence and motivation to fulfill these responsibilities.

I call these folders "histories" because they are documents of intellectual and social growth in the classroom community. Lisa explained earlier how her goals became more sophisticated as they acknowledged the intellectual force of social interaction while writing. Brian, another student in the same class, shows in his mid-semester reflection a similar growth (even though he addresses his reflection to me -- it took a long time for me to become invisible to Brian):

> When you first asked us to write goals at the beginning of the semester, I didn't really know what you wanted. My goal was to get an A and write better. But now I see that you want us to determine for ourselves what we need to do to improve our writing and to become better writers. My goal now is to make every word count, especially my nouns and my verbs. My writing group helps me by pointing out vague or useless words, like thing and nice and boring verbs. I help myself by reading with more awareness of the words that professional writers use (October 16, 1989).

<u>Autonomy directing reader response: Questions to initiate group discussion to each draft</u>

Sarah Freedman has pointed out how peer-response sheets thoughtfully prepared by teachers can result in brief, trivial verbal exchanges that do not even begin to engage with the ideas or the crafting of ideas in students' written texts (CCCC,

Atlanta, 1987). Hillocks' study of classroom modes (1986) and my own observations and experience suggest that just letting the students "have at it" by responding at the intuitive, gut level can result in engaging chat, but not necessarily effective talk about crafting writing. Pat Belanoff and Peter Elbow (1989) have drawn together several kinds of collaborative strategies based on questions that evoke responses ranging from just listening to the text being read to describing particular features of the text to analyzing particular features of the text to critiquing and evaluating particular features of the text. In the early part of the semester, several of these strategies are modelled in a whole class setting, initially by me, but, later, as students become more familiar with each other and with collaborating, by student volunteers. As students build their repertoire of collaborative strategies, they choose with the increased power of heightened awareness the kinds of questions that will provoke the kinds of response or assistance they require. Each new or revised draft presented or read to the group for response is accompanied by two or three questions formulated by the author, questions which indicate the growing control of the writer over his or her own writing concerns. That students can appreciate this increased authority and control is indicated in a comment made by Tracei, another student in that class, during a whole class discussion:

> ...becoming a better writer means you are more in control. It means that you know more about what you are doing and why you are doing it. It means that you

know what you can do by yourself and what you need help for....It means that you know your work will be read by someone else so you have to make it fit your purpose and [the readers'] needs. And [it means] you know more about how to do that!

Autonomy responding to group suggestions: Journal reflections

The debate triggered in John Trimbur's response (1989) to Harvey Wiener's assertion that evaluation of collaboration should hinge upon the effective evolution of consensus (1986) highlights the dynamic interaction that can lead to learning in collaborative groups. Both Wiener and Trimbur agree that the process of achieving consensus can be important in collaborative learning, but they disagree on whether it is essential to effective collaboration and on what aspects of working collaboratively benefit from consensus. For example, procedural decsisions usually require consensus or chaos could result. A focus for discussion might require consensus on particular occasions, and stylistic consistency on multiple-authored texts would benefit from consensus. However, responses to written text are, as Stanley Fish (1986) points out, so idiosyncratic that a call for consensus might easily silence a tentative, inquiring voice in the group while it enforces a more strident, dominant voice. For this reason, I ask that students write journals after each collaborative session. These journal entries react to the group discussion, elaborating upon which of the comments were most and

least helpful, which the student might incorporate into the next draft and why, and which (s)he rejected and why. In this way, the writer remains in charge of the authored text, while articulating and therefore organizing and categorizing the kinds of suggestions that are helpful and the kinds that are not. For example, the complaint expressed in the following extract from Susie's journal was common, especially early in the semester, before students realize fuller roles for their collaborative groups:

> I wish they wouldn't just tell me about punctuation and grammar. I can fix that later. I want to know if they like my paper, and why they like it, or, if they don't, then what I can do to make it better. I want to talk about the bigger problems we talk about in class -- the focus, the development, and especially my use of language, because I'm trying a whole lot of different things with language (Susie, September 24, 1989).

To extend this growing awareness of the kinds of responses that might be more helpful, I suggest that students also reflect upon how helpful they have been to others in the group, and how their ways of helping have changed as the semester has progressed.

Control over teacher's response: Letters of transmittal and response

The collaborative chain I try to forge in my writing classes has three interlocking links: whole class, small group, and student-

teacher. I therefore want student writers to direct my responses to their writing just as they direct their group responses. Furthermore, much recent research has questioned the effectivness of teachers' responses, suggesting that either students do not read them or, that when they do read them, they frequently misunderstand them. When students direct my reading of their writing, they have a vested interest in reading my responses, and, since they are the ones who have chosen the categories or areas of concern, they are less likely to misunderstand my comments.

Every composition handed in for my reading, whether it be mid-draft or final draft, is accompanied by a letter of transmittal that gives the following information:

a) goals for this particular composition (using the metadiscourse of the class statement of "good writing")

b) how the collaborative writing group helped the student to achieve these goals (or hindered him/her)

c) any particular risks taken, or worries, or features of the writing that especially please the student

d) directions on how the reader/teacher should read and respond to the paper; what, in particular, the student desires comments about.

After each composition, students write letters of response to my comments in order to maintain ongoing dialogue about writing

using the metadiscourse established by and within the class. Because of the group members' contributions to the evolution of any written text, students are encouraged to include their group members' reactions to my comments as well as their own.

From dialogue to dialectic: the final frontier of autonomy

Although this triple-tiered pedagogical approach to collaboration may seem at first blush to be highly prescriptive, it is intended primarily as a mechanism to enable students to take more charge over their writing goals, processes, and valuations. However, at the same time that it is a mechanism, it is also an ideological statement of a particular epistemology of writing. It asserts that writing is a context-bound, communally-evolved, socially-based act; that students have a broad, socially-shared yet idiosyncratic base of knowledge about language; and that, with some enabling teacher-interventions, students can draw upon their tacit knowledge of language to help each other write more effectively. The move from dialogue to dialectic parallels the move from a classroom that "does group work sometimes" to a classroom of collaborating students. For students to gain autonomy as true student collaborators rather than as teacher-directed peer groups, collaboration needs to be an integral part of learning and writing in every class period. When I asked Lisa why she thought that her experiences with collaboration in freshman composition had been beneficial, her immediate response was, "We do it every day." She went on to explain:

> At first, I thought, 'Oh no, more wasted time,' when we started, but then, as we did it every class, and learned more about different ways it can help us with our writing, I began to look forward to it. And that's really saying something! I hate listening to somebody lecture for 75 minutes. This is so much more interesting, and helpful. If you had told me at the beginning of the semester we would be spending most of the class time in groups by the end of the semester, I would probably have dropped out and looked for a different section. Now, I don't know how I'll write anything once I lose the support of my group. We even meet to help each other with papers in other classes.

To Lisa, collaboration has become not an extra activity, to be done when there is time, or when her teacher thinks it might be a good technique for a change, but rather an essential part of her processes of learning and writing. She sees herself as a qualified reader of her peers' papers, and recognizes the ability of her peers to help her respond to the needs -- and sometimes idiosyncracies -- of different readers. In echo of Kathy's statement that "A collaborative writing class is the only way to teach writing with integrity," Lisa sees writing as a social act with social implications and consequences:

> I never really thought before of someone actually reading my paper. Of course the teacher always did, but I mean a real reader. I never thought my writing could

> influence how somebody thought about something. But I loved it when Brian laughed at some things I wrote, and I was amazed when Chris got really angry at something I wrote about men. I love having an audience to read and respond to everything I write (Journal, November 2, 1989).

Has Lisa simply switched dependency on her teacher to dependency on her group? And, if so, where then lies her autonomy as a writer? It begins, I suggest, in her recognition that her peers have authority as readers of her work, just as she has authority as a reader of theirs. The authority previously vested in her teacher begins to be shared, a redistribution of the locus of power over making meaning and valuing written expression in the classroom. This redistribution of authority is aided in the pedagogical approach to collaboration I have just described by the initial valuing of students' views of what constitutes good writing, expressed in their own language, by the students' determining and formulating their own writing goals, and by the students' taking charge of authorial concerns in their writing, concerns that will arise out of their own writing goals, curricular goals, syllabus requirements, and reader reaction to daily writing, whether the reader be the teacher, a fellow student, or the student-writer herself. An end-of-semester class discussion about what it means to become a better writer allowed Lisa an opportunity to show the autonomy of her position as a

writer in a collaborating group:

> I couldn't have done that [become a better writer] without my group. We laughed, we fought, we grumbled, and sometimes we even sloughed off, but we learned more from each other -- or, at least I learned more from them and I hope they learned from me -- than I ever did in a lecture class where we just handed finished papers in. When you told us on the first day that we were to think of ourselves as writers in this class [rather than as students writing], I thought you were pushing it too far. But, from working with my group I do think of myself as a writer now. And I see the world differently.

Notes

[1] A detailed report on this study, sponsored by the NCTE Research Foundation, has just been completed. Entitled, "Collaboration: See Treason -- A Three-Year Study of Collaboration in Freshman Composition Classrooms," the report is available by contacting the author of this article.

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